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AUTHOR Iaccino, James F.
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ABSTRACT

Many colleges and universities lack a formal evaluation system to assess their advising programs. Illinois Benedictine College, however, has consistently evaluated its Freshman Advising Program (FAP) on an annual basis ever since its inception. In 1986, the college decided to implement the new Benedictine Advising Survey in the exit interview process in an effort to more thoroughly assess the needs of its freshman students. Responses to this instrument were very consistent with those obtained from the previously used Kramer and Gardner (1979) Form; further, current freshman evaluations were significantly higher in some advising areas when the 1986-1987 and 1987-1988 years were compared. Freshmen over those 2 academic years have rated advisors very strongly in most areas and have perceived their advisor to be a good and competent resource. These findings suggest that Illinois Benedictine College's FAP was successfully accomplishing its primary goals of allowing freshmen to take a more active role in their course scheduling and assisting them in their tentative life/career plans. The results of employing such an advising evaluation system had a positive impact on the college's student retention, suggesting that all colleges and universities should regard advising as an integral part of their mission statement. (Author/NB)

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Evaluation of Illinois Benedictine's Freshman Advising Program via the New Benedictine Advising Survey

James F. Iaccino

Illinois Benedictine College

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Abstract

Many institutions are sorely lacking a formal evaluation system to assess their advising programs. Illinois Benedictine College, however, has consistently evaluated its Freshman Advising Program (FAP) on an annual basis ever since its inception. In 1986, the college decided to implement the new Benedictine Advising Survey in the exit interview process in an effort to more thoroughly assess the needs of its freshmen. Responses to this instrument were very consistent with those obtained from the previously used Kramer and Gardner (1979) Form; further, current freshmen evaluations were significantly higher in some advising areas when the 1986-87 and 1987-88 years were compared. The results of employing such an advising evaluation system had a positive impact on IBC's student retention, highlighting the fact that all institutions should regard advising as an integral part of their mission statement.

Evaluation of Illinois Benedictine's Freshman Advising Program via the New Benedictine Advising Survey

According to a recent ACT National Survey (Crockett & Levitz, 1984), many academic advising programs are not evaluated on a systematic basis. In fact, 76 percent of the 754 institutions surveyed were sorely lacking an evaluation tool to assess their programs, while approximately half the institutions had no specific evaluation of their individual advisors. One might think that this need to have an adequate evaluation system for advising programs and its members is a direct result of having few assessment instruments; however, this is not the case. Srebnik (1988) provides an extensive review of the evaluation tools that are available, ranging from student surveys to advisor surveys to even dual form instruments that both student and advisor can answer. In total, Srebnik lists 29 types of instruments which are on the market to date that can be used with a wide variety of institutions to evaluate advising performance. The question then stands, will colleges view academic advising important enough to assess in the future years.

We now know that advising has a number of positive effects, one being an increase in student retention. A comprehensive survey of college administrators recently performed by Beal and Noel (1980) showed that the officials consistently rated

inadequate advising as a major cause of student attrition, while they viewed a caring attitude by faculty and staff (especially within the one-to-one advising relationship) as the strongest student retention factor. Other studies have further highlighted this relationship between advising and retention (Baldridge, Kemerer, & Green, 1982; Chernin & Goldsmith, 1986; Crockett, 1978; Glennen, 1975; Habley, 1981; Hadley, 1976; Hill, 1979; Miller, 1985; Noel, 1976). Forrest (1982) even proposed that if students receive the necessary career guidance during their freshman year, they will show greater persistence and be the more likely graduates of the institution. Though one can see the importance of advising for both student as well as institutional survival, it seems surprising that so many college campuses are not evaluating their programs to determine whether the needs of their students are being satisfied.

Benedictine's Advising Program

Unlike the aforementioned institutions, Illinois Benedictine College, a small private four-year college in the Western suburb of Lisle, has had its Freshman Advising Program (FAP) consistently evaluated on an annual basis since the 1981-82 academic year. Before freshmen are transferred to their major departments at the end of their first year, an exit process occurs in which the faculty advisor has typically distributed

the 39-item Kramer and Gardner (1979) Advising Survey Form. Questions on this form are oriented around three areas: advisee meetings (statements 1 through 22), advisor helpfulness (statements 23 through 32), and the advisor-advisee relationship (statements 33 through 39). Iaccino (1988) has shown that not only have advisor evaluations improved over the years, but that these ratings have been outstandingly better than the remaining students' who were advised by the rest of the Illinois Benedictine faculty.

Benedictine's New Advising Survey

After careful planning and deliberation in the latter part of the 1986 term, the college community then decided to adopt a new exit instrument that: 1) would assess the needs of Benedictine students more precisely; 2) would be briefer and more concise, thus encouraging a better completion as well as return rate; and 3) would include open-ended comments for greater elaboration of responses. The product finally generated was a single page, 15-item survey with space provided on the back side for additional comments.

Insert Table 1 about here

Approximately two-thirds of the statements have been

modified from ones employed in other advising surveys. For instance, statements 2, 3, 8, 11, 12, and 15 are derived from the Kramer and Gardner (1979) Form while statements 1, 7, 9, and 10 are adapted from the Ford (1985) Advisor Perception Inventory. The remaining ones measure characteristics unique to Benedictine advisors.

Item 15 was (and is) considered to be the most important statement on the survey. As Cashin (1979) notes, examining responses to this sentence alone provides the quickest way of arriving at advisor assessment. Moreover, statements 8 and 11 which emphasize major weaknesses in advising were included to reduce the chances of subject response bias.

Results of the Benedictine Survey

Responses to this newer exit tool have been quite encouraging and very consistent with those obtained from the Kramer and Gardner (1979) Form. Freshmen over the past two academic years have rated advisors very strongly in most areas (i.e., high "3"s and "4"s along a 5-point scale) and have perceived their advisor to be a good and competent resource, as evidenced in the mean responses of 4.51 and 4.61 to statement 15.

Insert Table 2 about here

As predicted, lower evaluations occurred with the negatively-worded items as well as statement 9. With respect to the latter mean ratings, 3.03 and 2.93, advisors were trained to only handle academic matters; problems of a more intimate nature were specifically dealt with by staff members in that area (e.g., psychologists and nurses). Thus, it comes as no surprise that advisors received mediocre evaluations with handling problems of a more personal concern to advisees.

To further assess freshmen evaluations, a series of *t*-tests were performed on the averages between the two year periods to determine any significant changes in advisor perceptions. Three differences were noted, specifically in statements 6, 11, and 12. Freshmen in the 1988 period perceived their advisor to be more effective in helping them understand their responsibilities as advisees, $t\ (258) = 2.13$, $p < .05$; viewed their advisor as in less of a hurry to end advising meetings, $t\ (254) = 2.01$, $p < .05$; and saw their advisor as a more encouraging resource to their academic achievement, $t\ (259) = 2.40$, $p < .05$. Also, the open-ended comments generated a good deal more positive comments than negative, especially in the 1987-88 period. Possible factors to account for these perceived improvements include: 1) better advisor training workshops, 2) greater advisor turn-over in

the 1987-88 period with subsequently more volunteer faculty included in the program, and most importantly, 3) a heightened awareness of how advising skills could be improved based on the previous year's evaluations.

Conclusions

These survey results definitely provide a good indication that FAP was (and is) accomplishing its primary goals of allowing freshmen to take a more active role in their course scheduling and assisting them in their tentative life/career plans. As Srebnik (1988) states, "evaluation results can... point out areas of need for in-service training and determine the effectiveness of advisors or advising programs [at institutions]" (p. 52). Seeing that Illinois Benedictine has continually employed assessment devices, it has constantly received feedback on FAP and its advisors which has enabled the college to strengthen any weaknesses perceived by the students and grow accordingly. This author directs any institution that, as yet, does not have an evaluation system to start one: the process is simple, the results are easily interpretable, and the benefits are enormous.

One benefit is in the area of student retention. With respect to this factor, IBC had an attrition figure of 6 percent from fall 1986 to spring 1987 freshman registration, and a 21

overall percent dip from fall 1986 to fall 1987 sophmore enrollment. This year, we have lowered our attrition from fall to spring by an additional 2 percent and hope to significantly reduce the loss further from freshman to sophmore year. And based on our improved survey ratings, the anticipated retention figures look promising.

To conclude, once an institution makes a firm commitment to treat advising as an integral part of its mission statement, then the rest of the process will follow. Fortunately, IBC made this choice in 1979 and has since been modifying and remodifying FAP to more effectively meet the needs of the students it has been servicing. The question remains, "has your institution made the commitment to academic advising?". Will it in the challenging years ahead?

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Table 1

The New Benedictine Advising Survey

How descriptive of your meeting with your advisor is each of the following? Rate statements 1-15 using the following key:

0 1 2 3 4 5

with 0 = not applicable

1 = not descriptive (least accurate)

to 5 = very descriptive (most accurate)

My Advisor:

1. Has been readily available.
2. Encourages me to talk about experiences and special interests (circle 0 if not applicable).
3. Has helped me pick the right elective courses.
4. Is knowledgeable about courses in my (potential) major.
5. Is knowledgeable about graduation requirements.
6. Has helped me understand my responsibilities as an advisee.
7. Has helped make the transition from high school to college easier for me.
8. Gave me incorrect information about academic

regulations.

9. Is willing to listen to and discuss personal problems with me (circle 0 if not applicable).
10. Has been actively helpful and has been genuinely concerned about my welfare.
11. Seems in a hurry to end meetings.
12. Has encouraged me toward my best academic achievement.
13. Is knowledgeable about where I should go to find appropriate help for counseling, study skills, and career planning.
14. Has encouraged me to contact faculty in my (potential) major.
15. Is a good advisor, overall.

Table 2

Mean Annual Responses (and Standard Deviations) on the Benedictine Advising Survey

Statement	1986-87[a]	1987-88[b]
1	4.17 (0.90)	4.37 (0.77)
2	3.71 (1.53)	3.80 (1.60)
3	4.21 (1.01)	4.33 (0.99)
4	3.73 (1.16)	3.84 (1.11)
5	4.43 (0.96)	4.50 (0.91)
6+	4.22 (1.01)	4.46 (1.80)
7	4.16 (0.98)	4.15 (1.09)
8	1.16 (1.64)	0.96 (1.45)
9	3.03 (2.06)	2.93 (2.20)
10	4.14 (1.03)	4.31 (0.93)
11+	1.14 (1.39)	0.84 (1.00)
12+	4.29 (0.79)	4.56 (0.96)
13	4.24 (1.04)	4.28 (1.17)
14	4.27 (1.08)	4.34 (1.26)
15	4.51 (0.73)	4.61 (0.71)

Note. Values in parentheses are corresponding standard deviations to the averages.

[a] $n = 154$ [b] $n = 107$ + $p < .05$